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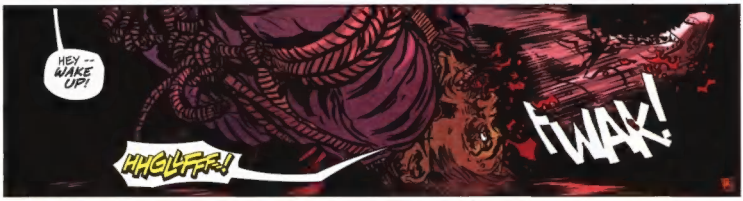
WAIT. LET ME TRY ANOTHER ONE. HOW 'BOUT THIS...
...HOW A MADMAN MAKES ERRORS REPEATEDLY.
C'MON... AM I EVEN CLOSE?
PLOP
BLOOP


HEY -- WAKE UP!
HHGLFFF!
TWAK!

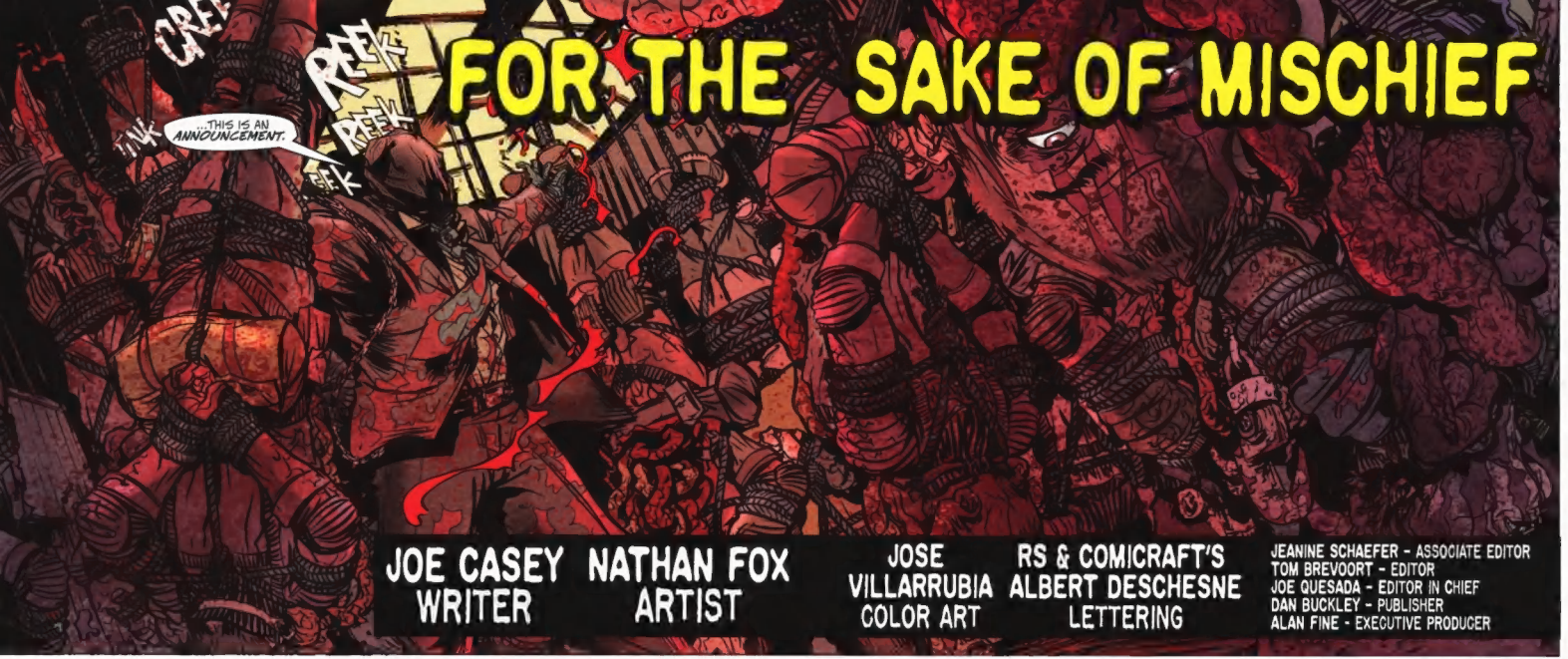
Y'KNOW, YOU'RE THE LAST ONE. I'M SURE YOU'VE BEEN WONDERING EXACTLY WHAT I'M UP TO HERE. JUST LIKE I'VE BEEN WONDERING EXACTLY WHAT IT STANDS FOR.
HOW ALL MANIACAL MANDATES ENGENDER RETRIBUTION...?
YOU DON'T KNOW, DO YOU? IT'S STITCHED ON YOUR COLORFUL NEW UNIFORM AND YOU DON'T KNOW.
OH WELL --

SLACH
... HERE'S WHAT BLIND FAITH'LL GET YOU.
HUURRK--!
LESSON LEARNED...

SLUCH
...THE HARD WAY.

YOU'RE ABOUT THIRTY SECONDS AWAY FROM DEATH. PROUD AS HELL YOU HAVEN'T GIVEN UP NAME, RANK, SERIAL NUMBER...
SHNK!

...BUT I DON'T CARE ABOUT ANY OF THAT. I DON'T CARE WHAT YOU KNOW.
HWPF
PROBABLY NOTHING, ANYWAY. GRUNTS NEVER DO. BUT INFORMATION IS NOT WHAT I'M AFTER.
THIS ISN'T AN INTERROGATION...



FOR THE SAKE OF MISCHIEF

JOE CASEY
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NATHAN FOX
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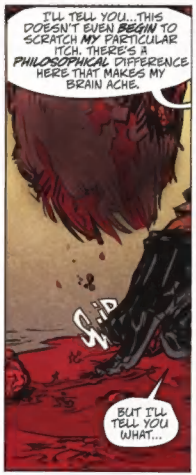
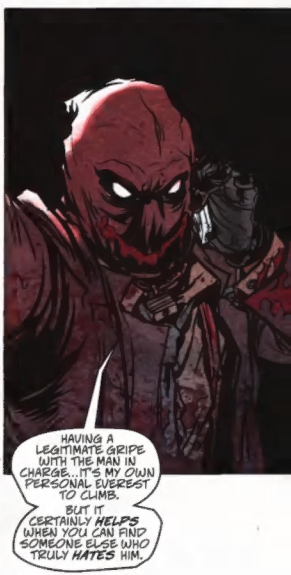
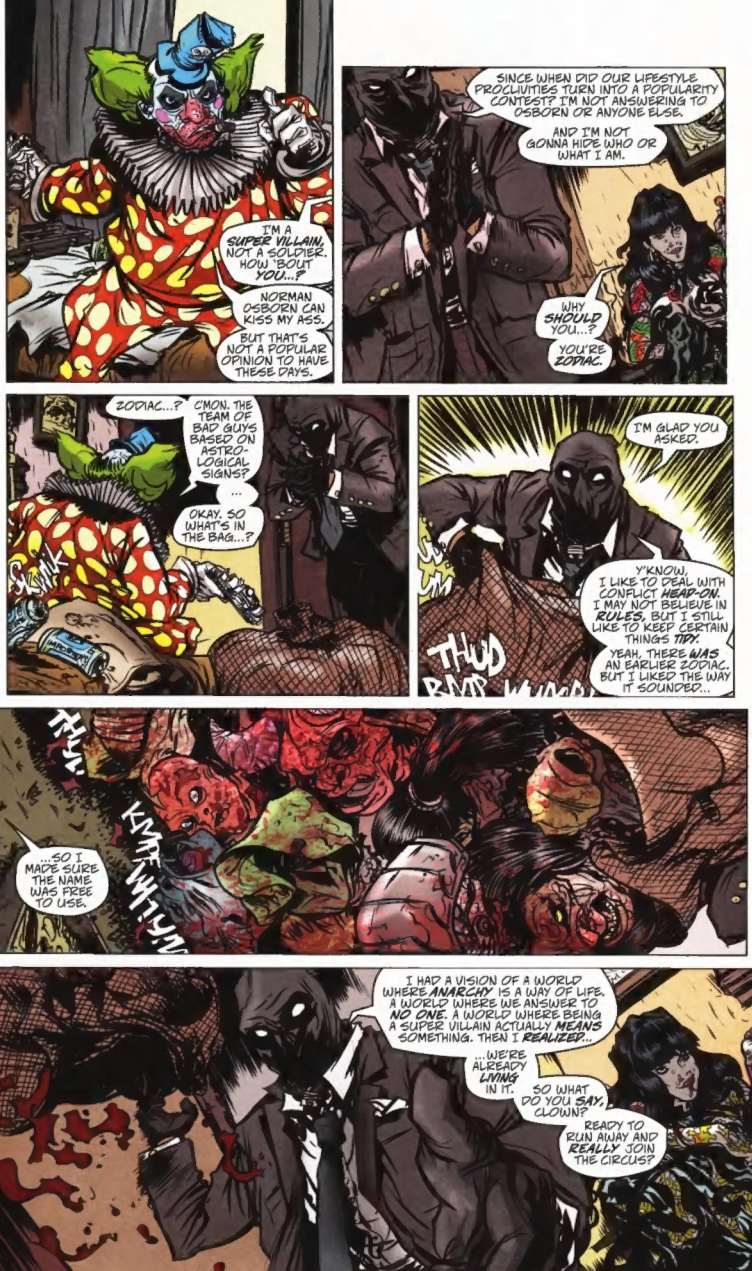

I'LL TELL YOU...THIS DOESN'T EVEN *BEGIN* TO SCRATCH *MY* PARTICULAR ITCH. THERE'S A *PHILOSOPHICAL* DIFFERENCE HERE THAT MAKES MY BRAIN ACHE.
BUT I'LL TELL YOU WHAT...

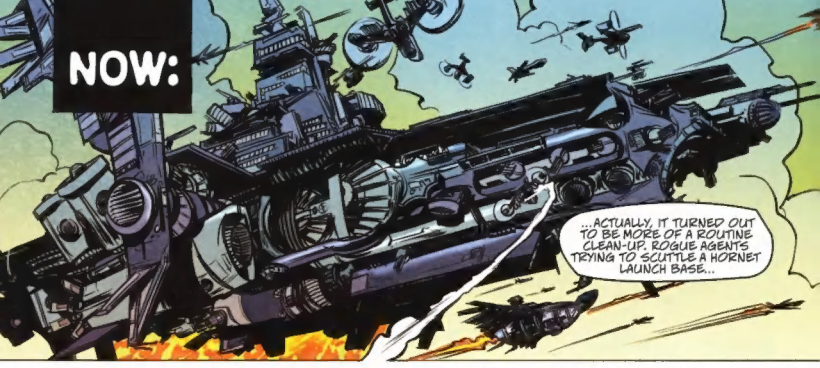
I'M ALL THROUGH HERE, MARS. AS EXPECTED --
-- IT WAS A CLEAN SWEEP. I'M BATTING A THOUSAND, BABY.
NOW, THIS WAS A PLEASANT *DIVERSION*, BUT THERE'S REAL *BUSINESS* ON DECK...

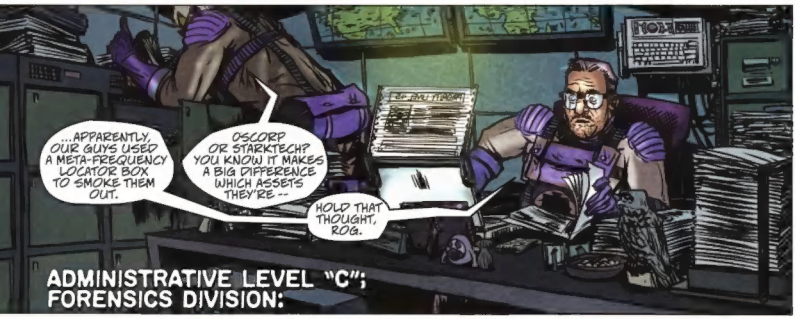

HAVING A LEGITIMATE GRIPE WITH THE MAN IN CHARGE...IT'S MY OWN PERSONAL EVEREST TO CLIMB.
BUT IT CERTAINLY *HELPS* WHEN YOU CAN FIND SOMEONE ELSE WHO TRULY *HATES* HIM.

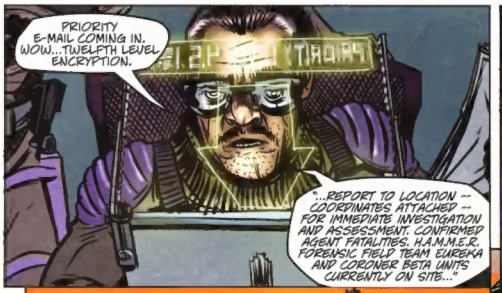
FLASHBACK/TWO WEEKS AGO:
-- WHEN OSBORN SPOKE AT A PRESS BRIEFING THIS MORNING.
EARLIER TODAY
...PROGRESS HAS BEEN MADE, BUT I'M NOT HERE TO GIVE ANYONE FALSE HOPE.
I AM DIRECTOR OF NATIONAL SECURITY. I FOUNDED H.A.M.M.E.R. TO PROTECT US FROM OUR ENEMIES...
...MY AVENGERS ARE YOUR AVENGERS. A FIRST LINE OF DEFENSE IN AN UNCERTAIN WORLD.
BUT IT IS ALL OF OUR COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY TO FIND OUR WAY OUT OF THIS DARKNESS...
NOK NOK NOK
HOUSE-KEEPING...!
SURE. C'MON IN...
...JUST IN TIME TO PUT ANOTHER MINT ON MY PILLOW.
FUNNY.
I'M DEATH REAPER.
I HEARD YOU AND YOUR OLD CREW CRASHED A WEDDING AT AVENGERS MANSION BACK IN THE DAY. DID THAT REALLY HAPPEN?
IF YOU SAY SO, SWEETHEART. NOW WHAT THE HELL --
DON'T MIND HER, CLOWN...

...SHE'S A FAN.
NOT JUST OF YOU. SHE'S A FAN OF THE LIFESTYLE. BORN INTO IT.
HER MOTHER'S NEKRA. EVER HEARD OF HER?
WHICH ONE? THE KID OR HER MOMMY?
WOOSH
HA. YOU'RE MY KIND OF GUY. IDENTITY CRISIS ASIDE, YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO BE A GUY WHO'S SEEN IT ALL, RIGHT?
BUT DID ANY OF US EVER THINK IT WOULD COME TO THIS...?
WHILE OSBORN PULLS DOUBLE-DUTY LEADING THE AVENGERS AS THE IRON PATRIOT...
...HE'S COMMITTED TO STAYING ON MESSAGE.
WE WILL NOT MAKE THE SAME MISTAKES THAT TONY STARK DID. I'VE BEEN GIVEN A SECOND CHANCE AND I DON'T TAKE IT LIGHTLY.
ONE MINUTE HE'S THE GREEN GOBLIN, GLORIOUSLY CERTIFIABLE IN EVERY WAY. THE NEXT, HE'S SOME KIND OF SUPER HERO CASHING A GOVERNMENT CHECK.
I DON'T KNOW ABOUT YOU...BUT I'M PERSONALLY OFFENDED BY THE HUBRIS ON DISPLAY HERE. OSBORN EXPECTS TO RUN THE SHOW AND THE REST OF US WILL SIMPLY FALL IN LINE...?
PLAFF!
THAT JUST AIN'T HOW I ROLL.


I'M A SUPER VILLAIN, NOT A SOLDIER. HOW 'BOUT YOU...?
NORMAN OSBORN CAN KISS MY ASS.
BUT THAT'S NOT A POPULAR OPINION TO HAVE THESE DAYS.
SINCE WHEN DID OUR LIFESTYLE PROCLIVITIES TURN INTO A POPULARITY CONTEST? I'M NOT ANSWERING TO OSBORN OR ANYONE ELSE.
AND I'M NOT GONNA HIDE WHO OR WHAT I AM.
WHY SHOULD YOU...?
YOU'RE ZODIAC.
ZODIAC...?
C'MON. THE TEAM OF BAD GUYS BASED ON ASTRO-LOGICAL SIGNS?
...
OKAY. SO WHAT'S IN THE BAG...?
I'M GLAD YOU ASKED.
Y'KNOW, I LIKE TO DEAL WITH CONFLICT HEAD-ON. I MAY NOT BELIEVE IN RULES, BUT I STILL LIKE TO KEEP CERTAIN THINGS TIDY.
YEAH, THERE WAS AN EARLIER ZODIAC. BUT I LIKED THE WAY IT SOUNDED...
THUD
...SO I MADE SURE THE NAME WAS FREE TO USE.
I HAD A VISION OF A WORLD WHERE ANARCHY IS A WAY OF LIFE. A WORLD WHERE WE ANSWER TO NO ONE. A WORLD WHERE BEING A SUPER VILLAIN ACTUALLY MEANS SOMETHING. THEN I REALIZED...
...WE'RE ALREADY LIVING IN IT.
SO WHAT DO YOU SAY, CLOWN?
READY TO RUN AWAY AND REALLY JOIN THE CIRCUS?


NOW:
...ACTUALLY, IT TURNED OUT TO BE MORE OF A ROUTINE CLEAN-UP. ROGUE AGENTS TRYING TO SCUTTLE A HORNET LAUNCH BASE...


...APPARENTLY, OUR GUYS USED A META-FREQUENCY LOCATOR BOX TO SMOKE THEM OUT.
OSCORP OR STARKTECH? YOU KNOW IT MAKES A BIG DIFFERENCE WHICH ASSETS THEY'RE --
HOLD THAT THOUGHT, ROG.
ADMINISTRATIVE LEVEL "C": FORENSICS DIVISION:

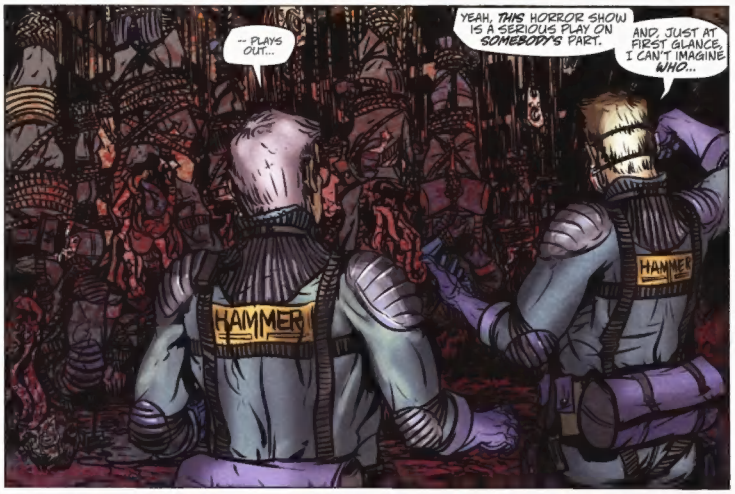

PRIORITY E-MAIL COMING IN. WOW...TWELFTH LEVEL ENCRYPTION.
"...REPORT TO LOCATION -- COORDINATES ATTACHED -- FOR IMMEDIATE INVESTIGATION AND ASSESSMENT. CONFIRMED AGENT FATALITIES. H.A.M.M.E.R. FORENSIC FIELD TEAM EUREKA AND CORONER BETA UNITS CURRENTLY ON SITE..."

HUH.
TIME TO GO TO WORK.

ZWM

AH, SCENIC HEMPSTEAD. WHAT'VE WE GOT, GENTS?
AGENT MURPHY. GOOD TO SEE THEY PUT YOU UP IN THE AIR AFTER THE SWITCHOVER. AS FOR WHAT WE'VE GOT HERE...

...WE'LL LET YOU BE THE JUDGE.
HEY, I'M AS SURPRISED AS ANYONE THAT I ENDED UP ON THE ADMINISTRATION DECK. AT LEAST OSBORN'S SPEECHES HAVE BEEN HITTING ALL THE RIGHT NOTES.
I GUESS WE'LL JUST HAVE TO WAIT AND SEE HOW IT ALL --


-- PLAYS OUT...
YEAH. THIS HORROR SHOW IS A SERIOUS PLAY ON SOMEBODY'S PART.
AND, JUST AT FIRST GLANCE, I CAN'T IMAGINE WHO...
HAMMER
HAMMER

WELL...
...ONLY ONE WAY TO FIND OUT, ISN'T THERE...?

E-REPORT

Open e-report. Entry: Special Agent Murphy, Alvin R. H.A.M.M.E.R. ID #:XO-0087-FR4 filing…

Current head count is ONE HUNDRED AGENTS found dead on-site. Significance of that number: Unknown. Beta units are prepping bodies for initial assessment.

TAK TAK TAK

First visual suggests random torture techniques, most likely with edged weaponry. Something akin to disembowelment, after which the victims quickly bled to death. On-site discussions posit the theory that we are dealing with MULTIPLE assailants.

However, upon closer inspection, my final report will assert a SINGLE suspect is responsible. The WOUNDS inflicted are not random at all…

…in fact, they all conform to one, specific PATTERN.

A symbol…or perhaps a LETTER…

At 13:27:05, went exterior to momentarily confer with colleagues from corresponding forensics departments.

Meeting lasted under five minutes. No consensus reached.

HAMMER

BLC?

CC this report to Director and all Deputies. Mark all pertinent files as an OPEN INVESTIGATION.

FLASHBACK/
TWO DAYS AGO:
SOME HYDRA FOOL DUMPED THIS AIRSHIP HERE AT LEAST A DECADE AGO. ENGINES ARE BURNT OUT. STILL STATE-OF-THE-ART TECH INSIDE.
ZODIAC REJIGGERED THE CLOAKING SYSTEM SO NO ONE WILL EVER KNOW WE MOVED IN...
MCKEESPORT, PENNSYLVANNA:

...NOT TO MENTION, HE RECOVERED THE ONBOARD ENCRYPTED DATABASE. BROKE THE CODES IN ABOUT THREE MINUTES. SO, NEEDLESS TO SAY... THIS HIDEOUT IS AS PLUGGED IN AS IT GETS.
IF YOU SAY SO.
I DO SAY SO. HOW D'YA THINK WE FOUND YOUR SORRY ASS...?

LISTEN, I'VE GOT A FINE APPRECIATION FOR THE SENTIMENT BEING EXPRESSED HERE... ...BUT, Y'KNOW, MY TIME WITH THE RINGMASTER IS WAY DONE. THE WHOLE CRIMINAL GANG THING...I'M KINDA BEEN THERE, DONE THAT.

BUT, HELL...I'M HERE, SO I GUESS I MIGHT NOT BE TOTALLY OVER IT. SOMETHING ABOUT THIS GUY...
TELL ME ABOUT IT. ESPECIALLY IN THIS CLIMATE, THE MAN STILL INSPIRES.
SO THAT'S HOW YOU ENDED UP HERE? YOU'RE A FULL-ON DISCIPLE...?

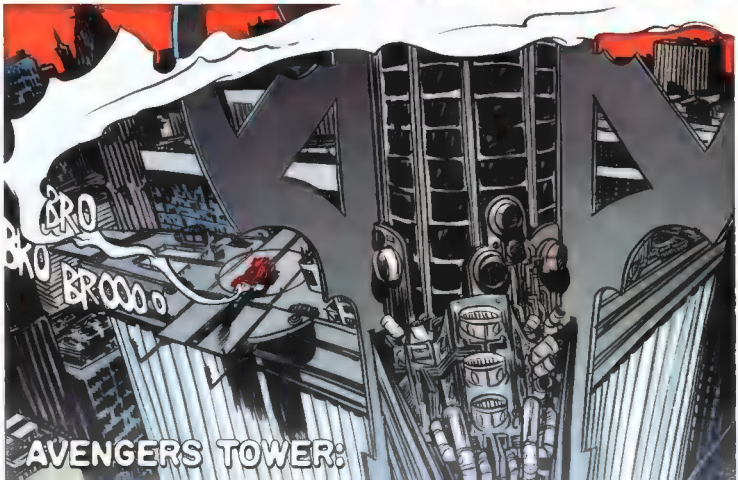
NOT AT FIRST. BEFORE OSBORN TOOK OVER, I HAD IT GOOD RUNNING THINGS IN THE BOWERY. I'M SURPRISED YOU HADN'T HEARD OF ME...
MANSLAUGHTER MARSDALE. I'M A DAMNED MEDICAL MIRACLE. THANKS TO A FEW CHOICE SURGICAL PROCEDURES, I DON'T FEEL PAIN. COMES IN HANDY...
"...ESPECIALLY WHEN I'M THROWING DOWN WITH PUNKS LIKE THAT SPIDER-MAN.
"I'VE GONE A FEW ROUNDS WITH THAT LITTLE PIECE OF *$#%."
YEAH, RIGHT...
...I HATE THAT WALL-CRAWLING FREAK. GOT A MOUTH ON HIM.
WELL, HE'S AT THE TOP OF MY LIST.
ANYWAY, A FEW MONTHS AGO, I GOT AMBUSHED IN MY OWN NEIGHBORHOOD. NO IDEA WHO IT WAS OR WHAT THEY DID TO ME...
"...EXCEPT THAT IT PUT ME IN A COMA FOR WEEKS.
"I DON'T KNOW HOW HE DID IT...BUT ZODIAC BROUGHT ME OUT OF IT. BROUGHT ME BACK TO THE LAND OF THE LIVING."
I GUESS I OWE HIM FOR THAT.
SO, IF YOU AIN'T FULLY ONBOARD, TELL ME NOW AND WE CAN GET THIS OVER WITH.
PEEM!
HEY... PEACE, BROTHER. I'M IN NO MOOD TO --
ENCODED CHANNEL [redacted] CALL. PRIORITY ONE VOICE RECOGNITION
SPEAK OF THE DEVIL...

...THIS IS HIM ON THE LINE.
GO AHEAD, CHIEF.
I'M ALL THROUGH HERE, MARS. AS EXPECTED --
-- IT WAS A CLEAN SWEEP. I'M BATTING A THOUSAND, BABY.
NOW, THIS WAS A PLEASANT DIVERSION, BUT THERE'S REAL BUSINESS ON DECK...
...HAS OUR MOLE CHECKED IN?
NOT TODAY. OSBORN'S GOT HIM ON TWENTY-FOUR HOUR CALL.
HE'LL FIND A MOMENT, THOUGH. HE ALWAYS DOES.
HAVING A LEGITIMATE GRIPE WITH THE MAN IN CHARGE...IT'S MY OWN PERSONAL EVEREST TO CLIMB.
BUT IT CERTAINLY HELPS WHEN YOU CAN FIND SOMEONE ELSE WHO TRULY HATES HIM.
"MY OWN PERSONAL EVEREST"...?!
OKAY, I'M OUT. I'LL HIT THE HIDEOUT COME SUNRISE.
SIGNING OFF...
WHO'S HE TALKING ABOUT? WHO ELSE IS IN ON THIS THING...?
YOU'LL FIND OUT. SEE, ZODIAC WAS BORN TO LIVE THE LIFE.
AND HE DON'T BOTHER PLAYING UNLESS HE KNOWS HE'S ALREADY WON.

NOW:
I'M LOOKING AT A PARTIAL LIST RIGHT HERE -- SECOND AND THIRD GENERATION SITES THAT NEED TO BE EITHER COMPLETELY STRIP-MINED OR REFITTED TO H.A.M.M.E.R. SPECS.
ZWWW
STARK MIGHT'VE BEEN A HAM-FISTED BUFFOON, BUT NICK FURY WAS NO FOOL BY ANY STRETCH OF THE IMAGINATION...

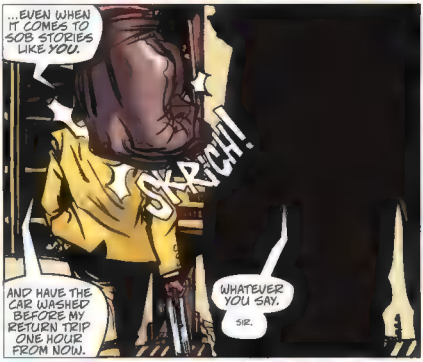
...EVEN AT THIS POINT, WE'RE NOWHERE NEAR FULL STRENGTH, AS LONG AS THERE ARE STILL REMNANTS OF THE S.H.I.E.L.D.-ERA OF GLOBAL INTELLIGENCE TO BE DEALT WITH.
I KNOW FOR A FACT THERE'S A HANDFUL OF DECOMMISSIONED BASES RIGHT HERE ON THE EAST COAST THAT HAVEN'T BEEN PROPERLY CATALOGUED. SOME OF THESE SITES STILL HAVE NETWORK ACCESS TO PLANETARY DEFENSE DATA AND THEY'RE SITTING EMPTY! I WANT MORE MANPOWER DEDICATED TO SEALING UP THESE CRACKS IN OUR SECURITY.
ONE SECOND...

BRO
...DRIVER. A LITTLE LESS BUMPY ON THIS LANDING, YES...?
TAK
DICK.


BRO
BRO
BROOO
AVENGERS TOWER:

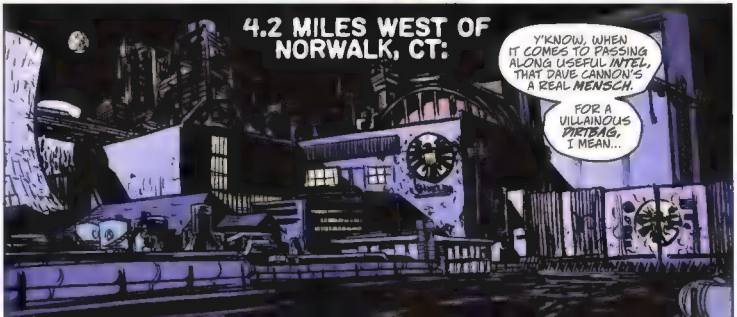
I HOPE YOU'VE BEEN PAYING ATTENTION IN YOUR NEW POSITION, CANNON.
CERTAINLY YOU'LL LEARN MORE ABOUT THE WAY THE WORLD WORKS AS MY PERSONAL CHAUFFEUR THAN YOU WOULD SPINNING YOUR WHEELS AS WHIRLWIND.
IF YOU SAY SO, NORMAN.

I THINK "MISTER OSBORN" IS MORE APPROPRIATE FOR THE SITUATION, DON'T YOU? THAT, OR A SIMPLE "SIR."
LEST WE FORGET, YOU'RE HERE ONLY DUE TO MY GOOD GRACES. I'M ALL ABOUT SECOND CHANCES...

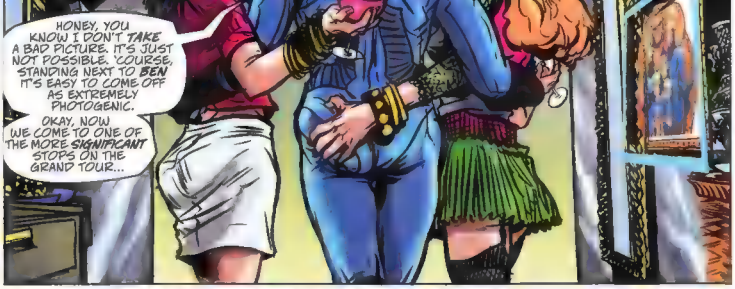

...EVEN WHEN IT COMES TO SOB STORIES LIKE YOU.
SKRITCH!
AND HAVE THE CAR WASHED BEFORE MY RETURN TRIP ONE HOUR FROM NOW.
WHATEVER YOU SAY. SIR.

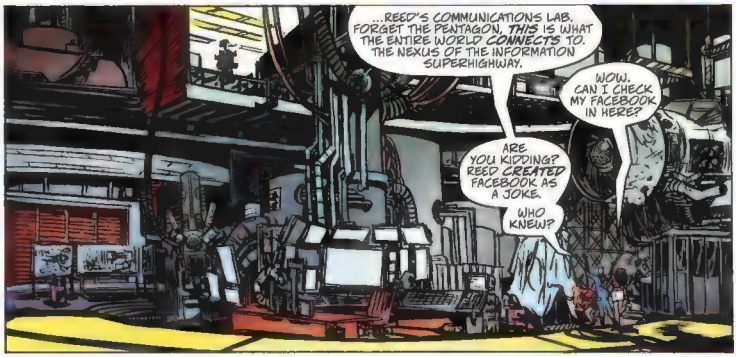
MUCH BETTER.
THERE'S HOPE FOR YOU YET, CANNON.

TIP TOP
THERE'S HOPE FOR ALL OF US, LOUD-MOUTH.


4.2 MILES WEST OF NORWALK, CT:
Y'KNOW, WHEN IT COMES TO PASSING ALONG USEFUL INTEL, THAT DAVE CANNON'S A REAL MENSCH.
FOR A VILLAINOUS DIRTBAG, I MEAN...

THEN AGAIN, I'M ALL ABOUT THE DICHOTOMIES THAT EXIST INSIDE EACH OF US.
TAK
TAK
CHAK
TAK
KAMMM
EVEN YOU, SEXY?
ESPECIALLY ME. THE SYSTEM IS BUILT TO TRY AND SMOOTH OUT OUR COMPLEXITIES. OUR ROUGH EDGES. BUT THOSE ARE THE BEST THINGS ABOUT US.
TAK
TAK
SPEAKING OF WHICH, YOU HAVE NO IDEA HOW EASY IT IS TO MANIPULATE THAT SYSTEM. THE TRICK IS TO USE THEIR FEARS AGAINST THEM.
SKIM
SO IT'S GOING TO WORK? NOT THAT YOU'VE TOLD ME WHAT YOUR GRAND SCHEME ACTUALLY IS...
OH, DON'T WORRY. IT'S GOING LIKE BUTTER. NOT ONLY THAT, I'M MULTI TASKING. THIS KIND OF HACK-JOB IS GOING TO BRING OUT SOME SUPER-DO-GOODER TO INVESTIGATE...
...THEY'RE REFRESHINGLY DEPENDABLE THAT WAY.
CAN'T WAIT TO FIND OUT WHO...
HRM
THE BAXTER BUILDING:
YOU DON'T HAVE TO WHISPER, GIRLS...
...WE'RE ALL ALONE IN HERE.
HEY, THAT'S A GREAT SHOT OF YOU, JOHNNY.

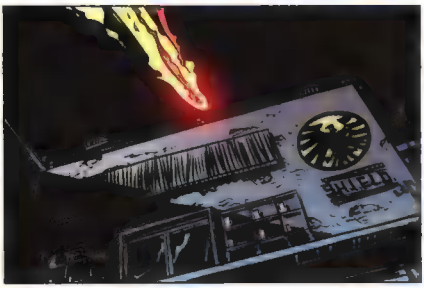

HONEY, YOU KNOW I DON'T *TAKE* A BAD PICTURE. IT'S JUST NOT POSSIBLE. 'COURSE, STANDING NEXT TO *BEN* IT'S EASY TO COME OFF AS EXTREMELY PHOTOGENIC.
OKAY, NOW WE COME TO ONE OF THE MORE *SIGNIFICANT* STOPS ON THE GRAND TOUR...


...REED'S COMMUNICATIONS LAB. FORGET THE PENTAGON. *THIS* IS WHAT THE ENTIRE WORLD *CONNECTS* TO. THE NEXUS OF THE INFORMATION SUPERHIGHWAY.
WOW. CAN I CHECK MY FACEBOOK IN HERE?
ARE YOU KIDDING? REED *CREATED* FACEBOOK AS A JOKE.
WHO KNEW?

SERIOUSLY. YOU CAN LOOK, BUT MAYBE DON'T TOUCH --
S.H.I.E.L.D. SECURITY ALERT! TRANSMITTING DATA AND LOCATION --
"S.H.I.E.L.D." SECURITY?!

C'MON, THERE *IS* NO S.H.I.E.L.D. ANYMORE!
WHAT THE HELL--?!

FEEL LIKE A LITTLE PHONE SEX?
IT'S TEMPTING. BUT I'M ALMOST DONE HERE. IF I'VE *TIMED* THIS RIGHT...
TAK TAK
TAK TAK


SHIELD

IMPORTANT LESSON, HON: ALWAYS COVER YOUR TRACKS. THE WORM HAS BURROWED, SO IT'S ALL GOOD. JUST A MATTER OF TIME NOW.
NOT ONLY THAT... ANYONE WHO DECIDES TO SHOW UP AND PLAY HERO...
SNAP
RRR
JPAK

...I'M READY FOR THAT, TOO.

KOOM

I'M IN THE MIDDLE OF A DOUBLE-DATE, SO CAN WE JUST GET THIS OVER WITH?
ANYONE...?
BUELLER? BUELLER...?

LETS MAKE A LOVE CONNECTION--!
HUHHHHND--!
LOOKING FOR LOVE, HOT-SHOT?!
FWAM!

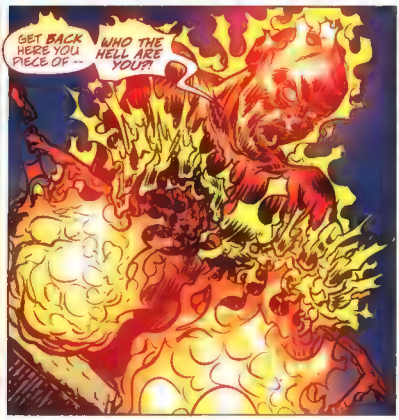
PLEASE ALLOW ME TO INTRODUCE MYSELF --
KRAK!

GLANG
THOCK

WHAM

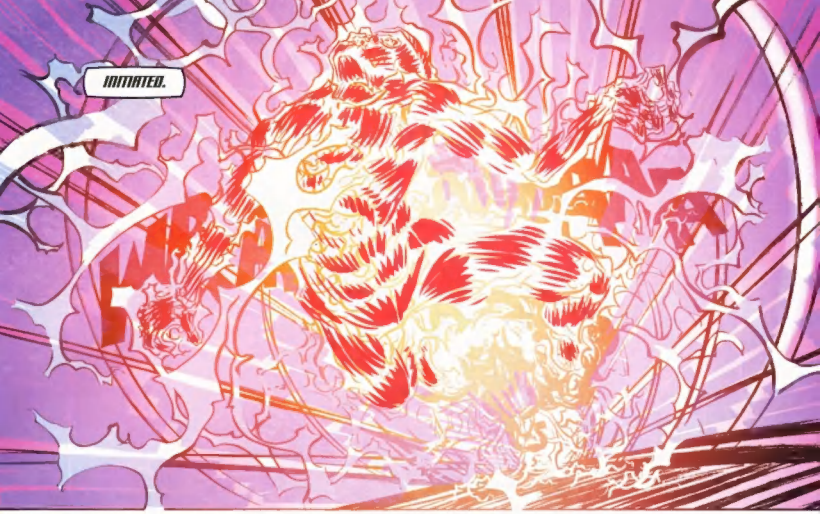
SONUVA --

TCHOK
CRRT


GET BACK HERE YOU PIECE OF --
WHO THE HELL ARE YOU?!

IS THAT A RHETORICAL QUESTION, TORCH?
I CAN'T TELL.
KOM
SPA!
THERE HE IS --
HEY! TRYING TO MAKE A NAME FOR YOURSELF, PAL? YOU PICKED THE WRONG GUY TO SUCKER-PUNCH--!
KHUNK
JOHNNY STORM, RIGHT? CELEBRITY SUPER HERO? MAN ABOUT TOWN?
YOU MAKE ME SICK.
KLANG
TING

Y'KNOW, I SEE THOSE BEARDS YOU HANG WITH FOR THE SAKE OF THE PAPARAZZI!! YOU PAYIN' THOSE POOR GIRLS?
YOU'RE A FLAMING JOKE --
FWIK
-- C'MON OVER HERE SO I CAN GIVE YOU ANOTHER BEATING...!
POOF
NOT THIS TIME --
KRA-KOOM!
RIGHT.
ALERT! ALL PERSONNEL - CLEAR CONDUIT AREA! VENTS ARE ACTIVE!
ALPHA-IONIC DISCHARGE--
VRIIIIIII
CLIK
KLAK!

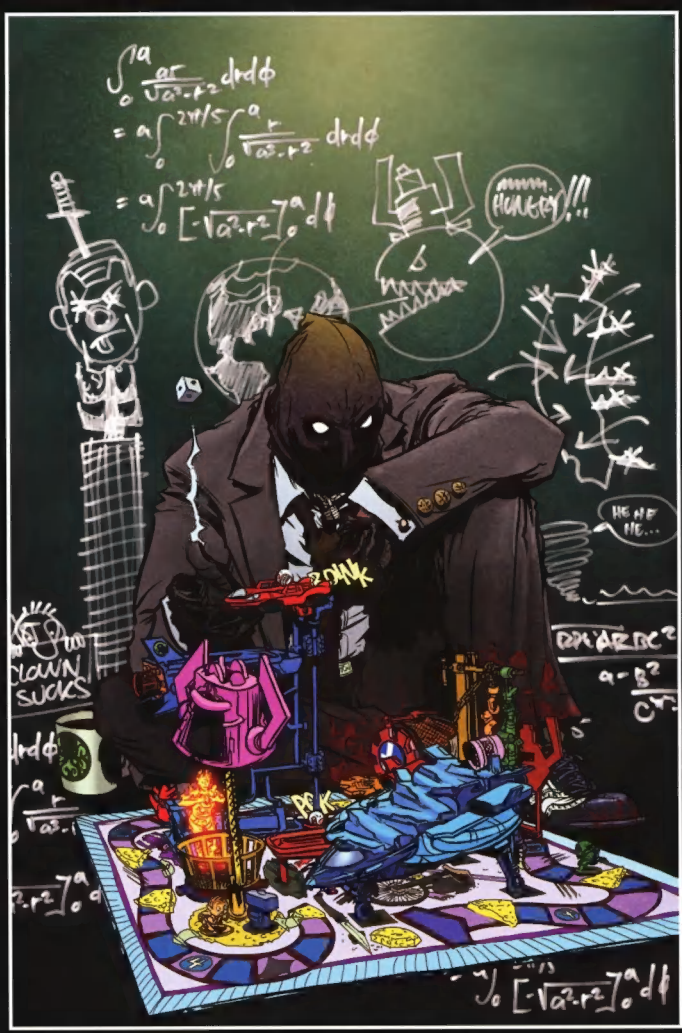

INMATED.

BRAM
SPAK

OUCH.
YOU SHOULD KNOW BETTER THAN TO PASS THROUGH AN ACTIVE ENERGY SIPHON SYSTEM. ESPECIALLY IN A FACILITY *THIS* SIZE.
I GUESS YOUR *BROTHER-IN-LAW'S* THE SCIENTIST IN THE FAMILY...

...HE'LL GET *HIS* SOON ENOUGH. THEY *ALL* WILL.
THIS IS ALL JUST THE *BEGINNING.*
SWIP
CONTINUED

NEXT ISSUE



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